



How Does Gen Z Really Feel About Democracy?

Insights from Three Profiles of Youth and Democracy



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01 Executive Summary

YOUNG AMERICANS represent both the present and future of political leadership and participation in the United States. Understanding the nuanced views and perspectives of this demographic, including their unique political attitudes and behaviors, is critical to bolstering democratic institutions and safeguarding against the risks of democratic decline. In this research, CIRCLE and Protect Democracy challenge the notion that young Americans think and behave as a monolith by offering clearer insights into youth's perceptions of and relationships to democratic principles and practices. In doing so, we pinpoint key strengths and challenges that can inform interventions that will help all young people value, support, and strengthen democracy.

Our data, from an exclusive nationally representative poll of young people, highlights the political views and behaviors of three groups of youth with different profiles of attitudes about democracy in the United States. Each profile is based on young people's beliefs and perspectives on six facets of democracy: 1) the principles of democracy; 2) the importance of protecting civil rights; 3) the justifiability of political violence; 4) support for bipartisan cooperation; 5) experience of affective polarization and; 6) confidence in democracy.



PROFILE 1

Passive Appreciation

63% of youth

PROFILE 1 has the most favorable outlook on democracy. These young people trust government institutions, have a high regard for democratic principles, and reject authoritarianism and political violence. That satisfaction and trust may be leading to complacency; this group is generally disengaged from forms of political action other than voting, and their lack of civic participation is a potential problem for the health of our democracy. At the same time, their trust in the system could be a key asset if these young people can be driven to defend the democracy they value and to work within institutions to improve it.

PROFILE 2

Dismissive Detachment

31% of youth

PROFILE 2 includes young people who do not express that they value core democratic principles and processes, have low confidence in the system as it is working now, and demonstrate higher support for authoritarian governance compared to youth with other profiles. While they do vote at a similar rate to their peers, they participate minimally in other forms of political action. One key reason for their inaction may be their low levels of support for civic development, which, alongside low levels of civic skills, could hamper a belief that they can create meaningful change. Overall, this group's lack of support for democracy presents a major challenge to sustaining and strengthening America's system of government.

PROFILE 3

Hostile Dissatisfaction

7% of youth

PROFILE 3 represents young people who value the core principles of democracy but are highly displeased with democracy as they are experiencing it today. They are also the most politically active young people and they express the highest support for political violence; they are so highly polarized, and their frustrations with the current system run so deep that they are more willing to consider extreme measures to achieve political goals. These youth are also highly capable, scoring well above average on civic skills like media literacy, which makes them a powerful, yet potentially volatile, force for change.

*Percentages are rounded to the nearest percent and may not add up to 100%.

Based on these profiles of democratic attitudes, we come to two overarching conclusions with implications for our democracy and for youth civic engagement efforts.

First, despite the current dissatisfaction with democracy in the United States, there is an overwhelming consensus among young people that democracy itself is fundamentally valuable; a majority have strong commitments to its core principles. But, for some youth, there is a chasm between their ideal vision of democracy and their perception of its current failures, which in some cases appears influenced by our system's inability to meet their political goals and needs. That can lead to detachment from democracy or, in some cases, frustration so extreme that it leads youth to consider violent measures for change. Changing negative youth perceptions of democracy may require improving democracy itself so that it works for young people.

Second, young people's democratic attitudes are defined less by their identities (race, gender, rurality, etc.) and more by their experiences of civic development: whether they have had the opportunities to develop civic skills like political efficacy, whether they trust civic institutions, and whether they participate in various civic actions. Youth who have received less support for civic development are less committed to a democracy that they may not feel prepared to participate in or feel they are a part of. The work of strengthening democratic attitudes is, in large part, the work of supporting all youth for democratic engagement.

Finally, none of the three profiles represents an ideal relationship with democracy. Each has its unique characteristics, strengths, and challenges, and we seek to find pathways for dialogue and collaboration across the three profiles. Our goal is not to shift youth from one group to the other, but to understand how to engage effectively with different groups of young people, and to identify the levers of change that can support a healthier relationship with democracy for diverse youth.

To that end, we make four broad recommendations, which we expand on in the full report:

- Don't just preach the value of democracy: engage young people in leading changes to our democratic institutions so they work for youth and are more responsive to their needs.
- Invest in access to opportunities for civic learning and engagement, and in support for youth to acquire the skills and values necessary for democratic participation.
- While acknowledging the extraordinary diversity of identities among Gen Z, focus on efforts to address differences by socioeconomic status and disparities in support for civic development.
- Create opportunities for collaboration and collective action that leverage young people's strengths, like the belief in democracy of youth who passively appreciate it and the urgency for action of youth who are dissatisfied with it.

02 Introduction



IN RECENT YEARS, concerns of democratic backsliding have intensified worldwide, with a number of democracies witnessing a rise in authoritarian sentiment.¹ In the United States, this trend has sparked anxiety among scholars, policymakers, and the public. While extensive research has explored the drivers of democratic erosion—including affective polarization, declining trust in institutions, and the rise of populist leaders²—less attention has historically been given to how different demographic groups perceive democracy and their place within it.

This report focuses on young Americans (ages 18-29), whose political attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors will shape the nation's trajectory for years to come. By understanding their perspectives, we can better assess the potential for both resilience and vulnerability within the American democratic system in the face of growing authoritarian pressures. We can also better understand how to support different groups of young people to improve their civic development and to advance more equitable youth participation in our democracy.

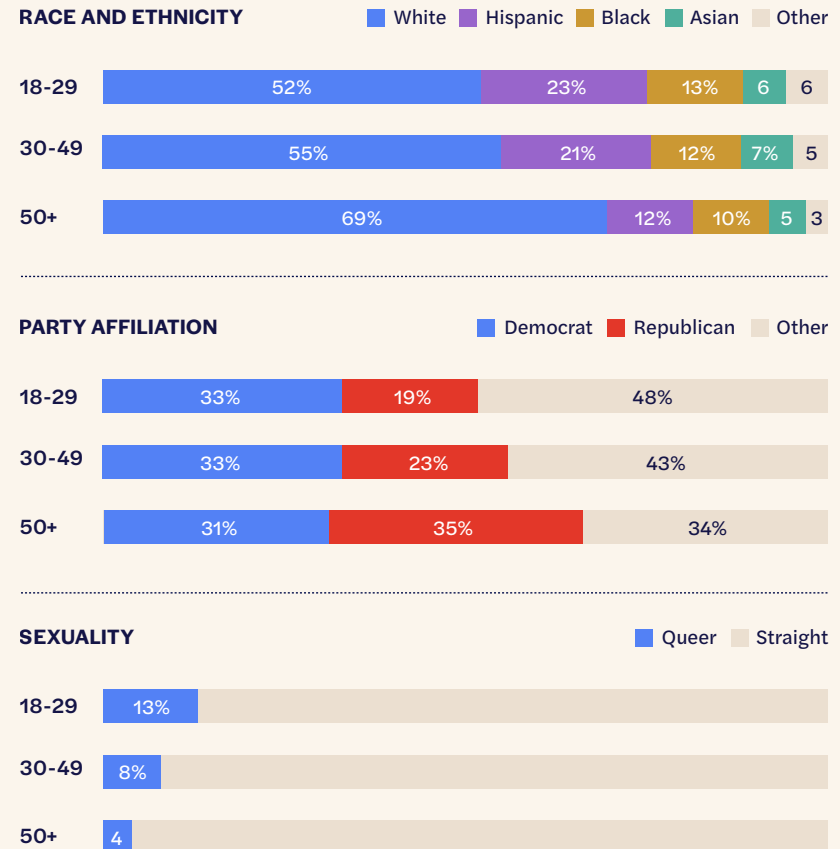
Who Is Gen Z?

Generation Z has grown up at a tumultuous time in American life. Their teenage years and young adulthood, and therefore their civic development, have been defined by a global pandemic, economic instability, major political shifts, increases in school shootings, activist movements on issues like racism and climate, and the rise of social media and digital platforms as a primary means of communication. These factors have led to a prevailing narrative in the media, and in some research, that Gen Z is a monolithic generation that is increasingly cynical and that approaches democracy with more skepticism than previous generations.

But beyond the fatalistic narratives emerging in academic literature and public discourse, what does Gen Z believe about democracy? And who makes up Gen Z—broadly defined as those born between the late 1990s and early 2010s—the most diverse, digitally connected, and highly educated generation in American history?

The diversity of Gen Z, in identity, experience, and ideology, informs the unique ways that they approach democracy. Exploring these nuances helps us better understand young people as voters and makes one thing clear: they are not a monolith, nor are their approaches to politics and governance uniform. At the same time, as we will see, they share a deep skepticism of democracy as they are experiencing it today.

Demographic Overview of Gen Z (Ages 18-29) Compared to Other Age Groups



Sources: American Community Survey 2023 Public Use Microdata Sample, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2023 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2022 Cooperative Election Study

*Percentages may not add up to 100%, as they are rounded to the nearest percent.

11%

of 18- to 29-year-olds believed the country was “generally headed in the right direction.”³

27%

of Americans aged 18 to 25 strongly agreed that democracy is the best system of government, compared to 48% across all age groups.⁴

Youth and Democracy: An Alarming Trend

Recent polling highlights a decline in faith in democratic institutions among young Americans. The 2024 national Harvard Youth Poll found that only 11% of 18- to 29-year-olds believed the country was “generally headed in the right direction,” reflecting a significant decline in optimism about the nation’s trajectory.³ Similarly, a 2023 survey by the American Public Media Research Lab found that only 27% of Americans aged 18 to 25 strongly agreed that democracy is the best system of government, compared to 48% across all age groups.⁴ This research, and others like it, indicates a diminished belief in the efficacy of traditional democratic processes among America’s youngest voters.

But previous research on youth and democracy has often missed the mark and oversimplified the narrative in three important ways. First: it has not always taken into account the extraordinary diversity of identity and experiences among young people, which may shape their attitudes toward democracy. Second: it has not always explored exactly which democratic principles and practices some young people reject and which others they may support; and it has not often delved into whether

some youth may reject democracy outright as a system of government, or whether they are instead disappointed or dissatisfied with American democracy as they have experienced it during their lives.

Third and most importantly: other research has not tackled what may be driving some young people’s negative attitudes toward democracy or embrace of authoritarianism. Understanding how factors like access to information and media literacy, support for civic engagement, and youth political efficacy is key to identifying potential levers for action to better support healthy democratic attitudes among all youth.

In this paper we identify three distinct profiles of attitudes toward and engagement with democracy. We hone in on how youth in each profile differ, often in nuanced ways, in their approaches toward democratic governance, and on some of the major factors behind those differences. And, based on our research, we provide recommendations for how to address the unique needs and challenges of each group.

About Our Research

THIS STUDY examines the differences in attitudes, understandings, and opinions of U.S. democracy within voting-age Gen Z youth (ages 18-29). We used young people’s survey responses on six key facets of democratic views to group them into distinct profiles using latent profile analysis, an advanced statistical modeling technique. This approach allows us to present a far more nuanced view of young people, not as merely “pro” or “anti” democracy, but with different perspectives on various democratic values, practices, and beliefs.

About the Poll

The CIRCLE Post-2024 Election Youth Survey was developed by CIRCLE at Tufts University and Protect Democracy. The polling firm Ipsos collected the data from its nationally representative, probability-based panel of U.S. respondents between November 14 and November 26, 2024. The subsample analyzed here is 1,286 self-reported U.S. citizens ages 18 to 29. The margin of sampling error for the entire sample (ages 18 to 34) is +/- 2.15 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. Unless otherwise noted, all data in this report comes from this poll.

Guided by a review of scholarship on young people's democratic views, we focus on the following six facets when considering young people's relationships with democracy. Each facet was measured by one or more survey items (see page 9 for a detailed view).

These facets of support for democracy attempt to capture values, views, and attitudes that are not directly linked to a specific political moment. At the same time, we acknowledge that our poll was conducted immediately after a highly consequential presidential election, which may have shaped some respondents' disposition. Moreover, ongoing developments in American democracy may also be shifting young people's attitudes. Overall, we believe that these facets, and the profiles based on them, represent relevant and enduring types of relationships to democracy among Gen Z today.

Six Facets of Young People's Relationship with Democracy

- 1 Support for the basic principles of democracy**
- 2 Belief in the protection of civil rights**
- 3 Rejection of political violence**
- 4 Support for bipartisan cooperation**
- 5 Strength of negative feelings towards opposing political groups**
- 6 Level of confidence in the current U.S. system of democracy**

Facets of Democracy: Survey Items

FACET 1

Valuing of basic principles of democracy

- It is important to me that leaders are chosen through free and fair elections, even if the candidate that I support loses.
- It's important that leaders try to represent the opinions of the people who elected them, even if they do not agree with some of them.
- It is important to have different views included in politics, even if it makes it harder to govern sometimes.
- Fair laws and equal treatment for all people are essential for a good political system.

FACET 4

Support for bipartisan cooperation

- I believe it is important that political leaders from opposing parties work together to solve national issues.

FACET 2

Belief in protection of civil rights

- An elected leader of the United States should not be able to go 'above the law' by unlawfully ignoring or overriding Congress or the Supreme Court.
- The military should not take greater control in this country to maintain order.
- The government of the U.S. should not limit First Amendment individual freedoms (such as blocking people from expressing certain opinions).

FACET 5

Strength of negative feelings towards opposing political groups (affective polarization)

- People who hold political opinions that are different from my own are wrong.
- I avoid engaging with people who hold different political views than my own.
- Note: Scores on survey items were reversed so that higher scores represent less affective polarization.

FACET 3

Rejection of political violence

- I would support an organization that fights for things I believe in even if the organization sometimes resorts to political violence.
- Political violence is sometimes necessary to make progress on what I believe is right.
- Note: Scores on survey items were reversed so that higher scores represent less support for political violence.

FACET 6

Level of confidence in the current U.S. system of democracy

- I am confident that democracy in the U.S. today can address the issues we are facing.
- The way democracy is in the United States right now is working well for young people.

In addition to comparing resulting profiles on the six key facets, we performed additional analyses to be able to compare the profiles on other characteristics. The additional benchmarks on which the profiles were compared are detailed on the right.

Civic Behaviors, Skills, and Support

SAMPLE SURVEY ITEM

Civic skill: Internal political efficacy

The belief in one’s ability to understand important political issues and participate effectively in civic and political life.

I feel that I have a good understanding of the important political issues facing our country.

Civic skill: Media literacy

The ability and tendency to critically analyze and evaluate the accuracy, purpose, and impact of the media that one is consuming.

I take steps to find out who created the content I view online.

Access to civic resources

The degree to which young people feel they have access to information, opportunities, and supportive structures and culture in their community that enables civic participation, as captured by the CIRCLE Growing Voters⁵ index.

It is easy for me to find out information about taking action to make a difference in the community.

Civic action

A score capturing the level of involvement across 17 civic behaviors beyond voting. Together, the score captures engagement in improving one’s community or addressing social issues. Civic behaviors include volunteering, contacting elected officials, protest action, and taking on leadership and advocacy roles.

Indicate whether you serve in a leadership role at a community organization (e.g., board member, parent leader, youth representative)

Trust in civic institutions

The level of trust young people place across 12 civic institutions ranging from Congress to each of the two main political parties to local government.

How much trust do you have in the following institutions to do what is right? [Your town, city, and/or county government]

The Facets of Democracy Among Gen Z Overall

81%

agree or strongly agree on the importance of having elected leaders chosen in free and fair elections

72%

of youth say that elected leaders should not be able to go above the law.

70%

of youth say that it's essential to have different views represented in politics

11%

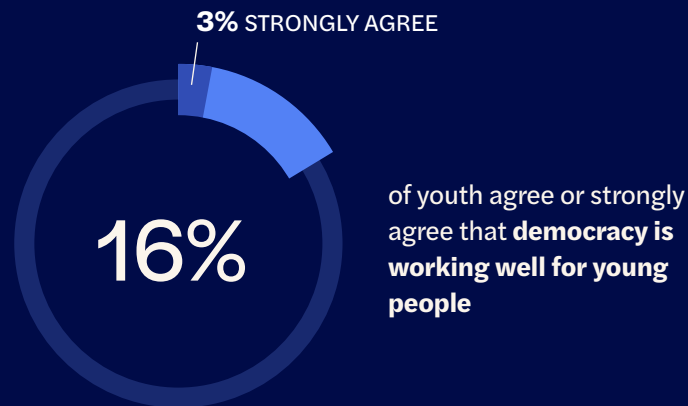
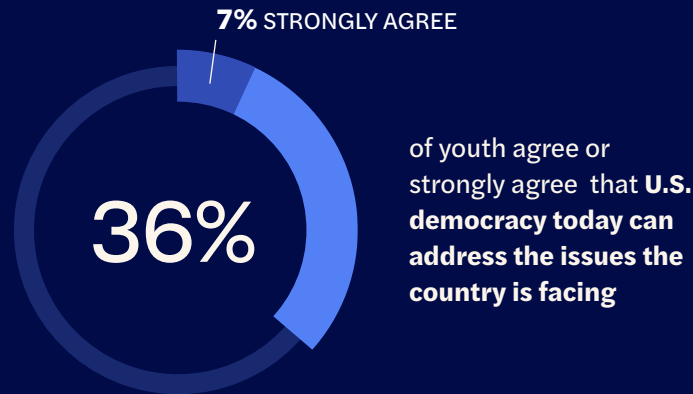
say political violence is sometimes necessary to achieve progress.

BEFORE DIGGING into the profiles and the differences within Gen Z at the heart of our research, we present a snapshot of findings for our entire sample of voting-age Gen Z youth, which describes their general attitudes toward democracy. Overall, a strong majority of young people support basic democratic principles and practices, even as many do not believe American democracy is working well for them. And overwhelming majorities oppose political intimidation and political violence.

Youth largely support the basic tenets of democracy and believe in the protection of civil rights. More than four in five young people (81%) agree or strongly agree on the importance of having elected leaders chosen in free and fair elections, and 80% agree or strongly agree that fair laws and equal treatment of all people are essential. Close to 70% of youth say that elected leaders should not be able to go above the law, that the government should not limit First Amendment freedoms, that it's essential to have different views represented in politics, and that elected leaders should represent the views of the people they represent.

Young people also largely reject political violence: only about 1 in 10 young people say it is sometimes necessary to achieve progress or that they would support an organization that engages in political violence. The same small number of youth say that violent protest, political intimidation, or the assassination of political leaders are "sometimes or always OK;" the vast majority say that these actions are never acceptable.

Gen Z Has a Low Level of Confidence in the Current U.S. System of Democracy



Instead, young people appear to want bipartisanship and compromise. Seventy-eight percent of youth say leaders of opposing parties should work together; 65% believe people with deeply opposing political views can find common ground. That may in part reflect that youth score relatively low on affective polarization: only 17% of young people agree that people who hold political opinions different from their own are “wrong.”

The difference between what young people want out of democracy—like compromise and action on key issues—and what they are seeing right now in American politics may help explain their views on our sixth and final democratic facet: confidence in the current system. Just 36% of youth say that U.S. democracy today can address the issues the country is facing, and only 7% “strongly agree” with that statement. Even fewer youth believe that democracy is working well for young people: 16% agree, only 3% “strongly.”

Appreciation, Detachment, and Dissatisfaction: Three Profiles of Gen Z and Democracy

PROFILE 1

Passive Appreciation

63% of youth

PROFILE 2

Dismissive Detachment

31% of youth

PROFILE 3

Hostile Dissatisfaction

7% of youth

OUR RESEARCH identified three distinct profiles of democratic attitudes among youth ages 18-29. Young people are not equally distributed among the three profiles: the first, which describes youth with a **Passive Appreciation** of democracy, includes nearly two-thirds of young people. The second, those who feel a **Dismissive Detachment** from democracy, includes nearly one-third. The remaining young people, fewer than 1 in 10, feel a **Hostile Dissatisfaction** toward democracy.

This section provides critical insights into these profiles of democratic attitudes, including the strengths and vulnerabilities of youth in each one, which can inform efforts to support and engage them.

One finding, which cuts across all three profiles, deserves special note. There were no major differences between the profiles in age, gender, rurality, party affiliation, and both voter turnout and presidential vote choice in the 2024 election. This challenges some common narratives about which groups of young people are more or less supportive of democracy, and suggests that attitudes cut across the political and demographic spectrum within Gen Z.

Instead, larger differences emerge when comparing the profiles across dimensions of civic behaviors, skills, and support, which are described in detail in each profile and which form the basis for many of our implications and recommendations.

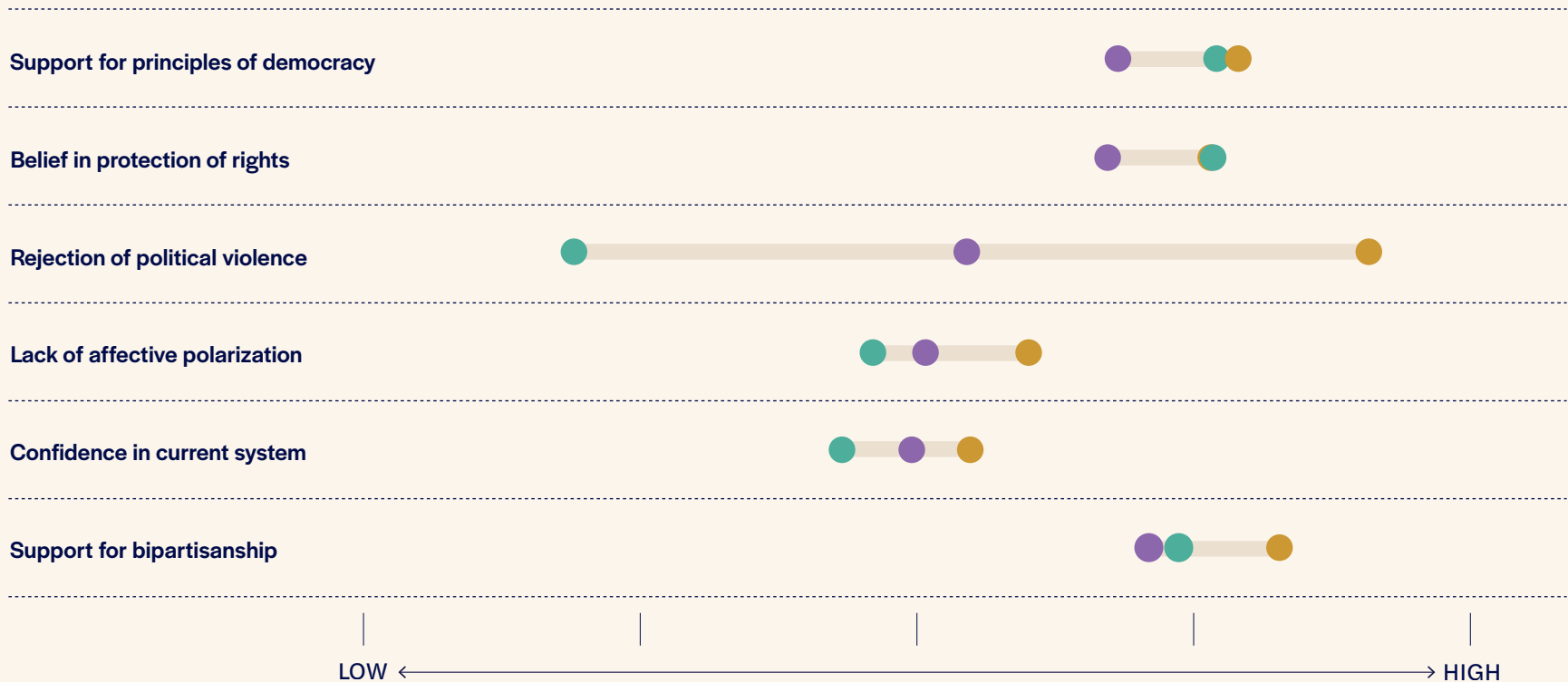
There were no major differences between the profiles in age, gender, rurality, party affiliation, and both voter turnout and presidential vote choice in the 2024 election.

*Percentages may not add up to 100%, as they are rounded to the nearest percent.

The Facets of Democracy Among Gen Z

Just as Gen Z is not a monolith, their support for various principles and practices of democracy varies widely within and between groups of young people, with the biggest difference in level of support for political violence.

● PROFILE 1: PASSIVE APPRECIATION ● PROFILE 2: DISMISSIVE DETACHMENT ● PROFILE 3: HOSTILE DISSATISFACTION



Civic Behaviors, Skills, and Support

Comparing each profile on these dimensions paints a clear and troubling picture: low levels of access to civic resources and support are associated with detachment from democratic principles and values.

■ PROFILE 1: PASSIVE APPRECIATION
 ■ PROFILE 2: DISMISSIVE DETACHMENT
 ■ PROFILE 3: HOSTILE DISSATISFACTION



PROFILE 1

Passive Appreciation

63% of youth 18-29

- 1 High support for democratic principles and practices, and high levels of trust in civic institutions
- 2 Enjoys strong support for civic engagement and high levels of internal political efficacy
- 3 Low levels of taking political action, perhaps due to complacency with the status quo

IDENTITY, EXPERIENCES, AND IDEOLOGY:

What stands out?

↑ Most likely to be conservative

↓ Least likely to be queer

Civic Behaviors, Skills, and Support

Civic skill: Internal political efficacy



Civic skill: Media literacy



Access to civic resources



Civic action



Trust in civic institutions

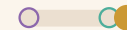


LOW MEDIUM HIGH

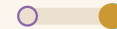
FACETS OF DEMOCRACY

Facet scores for Passive Appreciation trend **HIGHEST** among profiles.

Support for principles of democracy



Belief in protection of rights



Rejection of political violence



Lack of affective polarization



Confidence in current system



Support for bipartisanship



● PROFILE 1: PASSIVE APPRECIATION ○ PROFILE 2: DISMISSIVE DETACHMENT ○ PROFILE 3: HOSTILE DISSATISFACTION

Relationship to Democracy

The majority of Gen Z (63%) have an attitude toward democracy that can be characterized as **Passive Appreciation**, and which most closely resembles the attitudes toward democracy of the average young person in the United States.

Young people with a **passive appreciation** of democracy deeply value its core principles and have a strong belief in the protection of civil rights. These youth believe in the principle of free and fair elections, and they affirm that it's important “even if the candidate that [they] support loses.” They also support other core elements of democracy, such as elected leaders representing the opinions of the people who elected them, the presence of a diversity of views in politics, and fair laws and equal treatment for all people. At the same time, they reject authoritarian measures like military takeovers, elected leaders overriding other branches of the government, or the U.S. government limiting First Amendment freedoms.

While young people overall are generally dissatisfied with democracy as it stands in the U.S. today, youth with **passive appreciation** toward democracy have the highest levels of confidence in our current system. That may partly stem from relatively low political polarization: these youth were the least likely to feel affective polarization and the most likely to support cross-party cooperation. In other words, they did not possess negative attitudes towards those “on the other side” politically and believed in the importance of “political leaders from opposing sides working together to solve national issues.”



Finally, this group of youth soundly rejects political violence as a legitimate or justifiable tool for achieving political goals, strongly disagreeing with statements like “political violence is sometimes necessary to make progress on what I believe is right.”

Civic Behaviors, Skills, and Support

Youth with a **passive appreciation** toward democracy believe in it, but are not highly engaged in it. They participate in civic actions like volunteering, protesting, advocacy work, and serving in civic leadership roles about as frequently as youth who feel **dismissive detachment** toward democracy, and much less than those who feel **hostile dissatisfaction**. One exception is voting, which was relatively equal among all three profiles.

This group’s relative inaction is surprising and concerning, because youth with a **passive appreciation** of democracy enjoy more assets and support for civic development than the **Dismissive Detachment** youth as measured by the CIRCLE Growing Voters index, which captures young people’s access to, support for, and culture of civic development and engagement opportunities. These rich civic



Democracy gives many people a voice equally rather than having the loudest voices outweigh the quieter ones.

PROFILE 1 RESPONDENT

assets and environment also likely explain why youth with this profile score highly on civic skills like political efficacy and media literacy, especially compared to youth feeling **dismissive detachment** toward democracy.

One reason why youth with **passive appreciation** toward democracy scored low on taking civic action, despite having access to civic support and possessing civic skills, may be their relatively high levels of trust in civic institutions. That may suggest that these youth are willing to play a role in shaping who is in charge of these institutions by voting, but are otherwise content to hand them the reins of democracy without them engaging more directly in civic action.

Summary and Analysis

The **Passive Appreciation** profile captures how many Gen Z eligible voters feel about democracy in theory, though they are more optimistic than youth overall about democracy in practice. Compared to the other two profiles, youth who display a **passive appreciation** of democracy are least likely to be queer and most likely to be ideologically conservative.

This group, representing 63% of all youth, values democratic principles and processes, has a higher level of trust in many civic and political institutions, and is more satisfied with today’s democracy in practice. They are also less likely to hold negative attitudes toward

those different from them politically. Because this group is more likely to include conservative youth, that may represent, in part, less negative feelings toward liberal youth by conservative youth. But lower levels of polarization could also reflect the relative passivity of this group, which may be too complacent about politics to harbor intense negative feelings about those they disagree with.

At the same time, their satisfaction with and faith in democracy may be leading to passivity and complacency. Although they do vote at rates comparable to other profiles, their involvement in other forms of actions is relatively low, especially given their high levels of efficacy and support for civic participation.

Maintaining and strengthening democracy requires engagement from young people, not just through voting and other types of “formal” civic participation, but also by engaging informally with others in diverse forms of collective action. Simply supporting “democracy as is” may not be enough to make democracy stronger for tomorrow.

Similarly, this group of young people’s rejection of political violence is certainly positive for the future of democracy. However, their proclivity for peaceful, bipartisan, and

Maintaining and strengthening democracy requires engagement from young people ... Simply supporting “democracy as is” may not be enough to make democracy stronger for tomorrow.

institutional forms of political action could create a barrier to engaging in conversations with their peers or organizations who are trying to mobilize youth to take action with more urgency. It may be important to maintain these youth’s endorsement of constructive and nonviolent forms of civic engagement, while building bridges and opportunities so that this large group can find entryways into other civic actions beyond voting.

Additionally, while youth with a **passive appreciation** of democracy enjoy high levels of civic support and civic skills, there is still room for growth. With more opportunities to learn and practice media literacy, for example, these young people could better discern problems in our democracy to be addressed. They might also seek out and encounter alternative viewpoints that offer critiques of the current system, including information about how the democracy they are largely content with is not meeting the expectations and needs of some of their peers.

Likewise, with higher levels of political efficacy, these youth may feel more empowered and confident in their ability to affect change, prompting them to engage in more long-term, collaborative, and complex civic actions such as community organizing, taking a leadership role in civic institutions, and even running for elected office. Growing the civic skills of these young people, who represent the majority of Gen Z, will require a greater investment in support for civic engagement.

PROFILE 2

Dismissive Detachment

31% of youth 18-29

- 1 Below average scores on every facet of positive democratic attitudes
- 2 Low civic skills and lack of support for civic development may be root causes of detachment from democracy
- 3 Sense that democracy is failing to address their challenges may be driving their dismissal of democracy

IDENTITY, EXPERIENCES, AND IDEOLOGY:

What stands out?

↑ More likely to be BIPOC

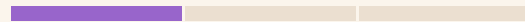
↓ Lowest educational attainment

Civic Behaviors, Skills, and Support

Civic skill: Internal political efficacy



Civic skill: Media literacy



Access to civic resources



Civic action



Trust in civic institutions



LOW MEDIUM HIGH

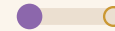
FACETS OF DEMOCRACY

Facet scores for Dismissive Detachment trend **LOWEST** among profiles.

Support for principles of democracy



Belief in protection of rights



Rejection of political violence



Lack of affective polarization



Confidence in current system



Support for bipartisanship



○ PROFILE 1: PASSIVE APPRECIATION ● PROFILE 2: DISMISSIVE DETACHMENT ○ PROFILE 3: HOSTILE DISSATISFACTION

Relationship to Democracy

About a third of youth have a relationship to democracy that we label **Dismissive Detachment**. Notably, this group of youth scores below average on all six facets of democracy included in our analysis.

These young people’s holistic dismissal of democracy as a system of government takes several forms. Compared to other youth, they are less likely to value the basic principles of democracy such as free and fair elections, the protection of civil rights, and bipartisan cooperation.

While their lack of support for the core tenets of democracy is cause for concern, some of their dismissal of it may be due to their lack of faith in its ability to function effectively. Our analysis shows that youth who feel **dismissive detachment** have very little confidence that democracy today can address the issues we face as a country or is working well for young people.

This group of youth also feels highly polarized: they hold negative sentiments towards those with political opinions different from their own, to the extent that they think they are “wrong” and are to be avoided. Unlike their peers who trust and appreciate democracy, young people with this profile of democratic attitudes are more likely to believe political violence is “sometimes necessary,” especially to make progress on what they believe is right, and more likely to support organizations that resort to political violence.



Civic Behaviors, Skills, and Support

Despite their lack of support for democratic principles and practices, youth with **dismissive detachment** from democracy turn out to vote at levels equivalent to their peers with other profiles and also take part in other civic actions beyond voting at levels at least equivalent to the youth with **passive appreciation**.

However, comparing their civic skills and levels of support to those of their peers starts to paint a picture of a group of young people who lack vital tools for effective and informed democratic participation. Youth who feel **dismissive detachment** from democracy have the lowest levels of media literacy, suggesting that they are often consuming political information without the ability or willingness to confirm its source, truthfulness, or intent. These youth also score lowest on internal political efficacy, meaning that they have little confidence in their ability to be effective political actors.

These poor civic skills appear strongly linked to a lack of support for civic engagement. They score the lowest on the CIRCLE Growing Voters index, which measures access, support, and culture for civic development. It is possible that youth who lack civic skills and

have a dismissive attitude toward democracy are just not taking advantage of resources for civic development and engagement that are available to them. However, the CIRCLE Growing Voters index mostly asks youth about their exposure to multiple civic engagement resources in their communities; low scores may signal a lack of accessibility to those resources or support in taking advantage of them. In addition to links to the low civic skills, the lack of support for civic engagement among **Dismissive Detachment** youth appears to have also contributed to the low sense of trust in civic institutions among these youth.

Summary and Analysis

Youth who feel a **dismissive detachment** toward democracy have the lowest educational attainment and are more likely to be people of color, queer, and from lower income households than youth with a **passive appreciation**.

It is highly concerning that roughly one in three young people feels a sense of **dismissive detachment** toward democracy. Their dismissal of core tenets of democracy extends to a lack of support for the processes necessary for upholding democracy, disinterest in cross-party cooperation, and

“ Our government is increasingly run by people who will not live [to] see the consequences of their implemented policies. As well as people who have never, or have forgotten what it’s like, to live as an average citizen with financial needs and pressures.

PROFILE 2 RESPONDENT

even in protecting individual liberties. All that, combined with their relatively higher endorsement of political violence, paints a worrisome picture.

Two key explanations emerge. First, our analysis shows that these young people are deeply unhappy with democracy as it is working today. When we consider that youth in this group are more likely to belong to lower-income households and to lack a college education, that dissatisfaction may stem from an understandable frustration at our political system's inability to address economic issues and their own hardships. Their sense that democracy is not working for them today may feed a perspective that democracy does not work at all and is not worth defending. Overcoming this mindset may require meaningful systemic reforms in pursuit of effective governance and tangible victories on the issues youth care about most.

Second, young people in this profile have low levels of important civic skills, which may be hindering meaningful participation in democracy. That lack of engagement may in turn feed dismissive attitudes about our system of government: it is harder to see how a system works, or can work, when you are not part of it or when you believe there is no room in it for your participation. In particular, higher levels of internal political efficacy—a sense of personal agency and the belief that their civic participation will lead to meaningful change—may help them overcome their refusal to engage with those who are politically different from them. Through taking collective action with others with diverse viewpoints, this group of youth could also reduce their affective polarization and develop a greater appreciation for democracy.

Lastly, we cannot overstate that this group of young people experiences a lack of access

to civic support. This disinvestment in their civic development likely contributes to their low scores on important civic skills like media literacy and could be one of the primary root causes of the challenges outlined throughout this section. Thus, one explanation is that **dismissive detachment** toward democracy is a symptom of a lack of access to full participation in democracy as it manifests in these individuals' own communities. The fact that this profile is more likely to consist of young people of color and queer youth, both demographics that disproportionately lack access to resources and that often experience marginalization appears to support this interpretation.

Their sense that democracy is not working for them today may feed a perspective that democracy does not work at all and is not worth defending.

PROFILE 3

Hostile Dissatisfaction

7% of youth 18-29

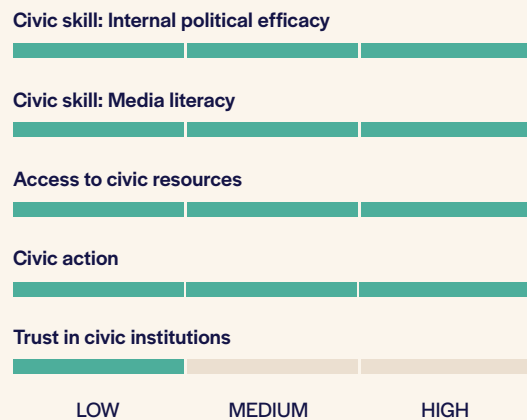
- 1 Defined by their endorsement of political violence and negative views of “the other side”
- 2 Believe in democracy in principle, but very disappointed with democracy in practice
- 3 Highly skilled and engaged group of youth that is ready and willing to take political action for major change

IDENTITY, EXPERIENCES, AND IDEOLOGY:

What stands out?

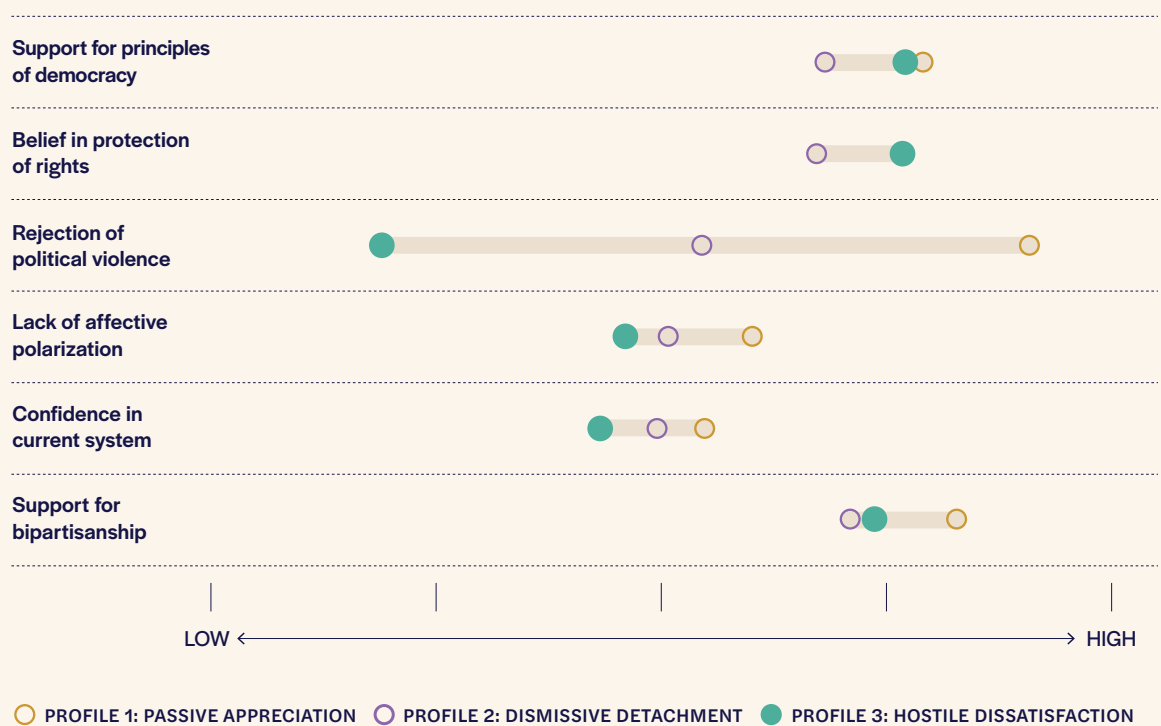
- ↑ More likely to be queer
- ↑ Most likely to be liberal

Civic Behaviors, Skills, and Support



FACETS OF DEMOCRACY

Facet scores for Hostile Dissatisfaction are the most **MIXED** of the profiles.



Relationship to Democracy

The smallest profile, representing just 7% of youth, feels a sense of **Hostile Dissatisfaction** with democracy. Their nuanced attitude toward our political system is characterized by a sense of urgency and alarm at what they may perceive to be a valuable system that is currently deeply dysfunctional and that may require combative measures to correct.

Unlike young people who feel **dismissive detachment** toward democracy, youth with this profile do tend to value the principles and rights of our democracy, scoring slightly above average in those areas. But they have very low confidence in democracy as they are experiencing it today. This gap between what they view as democracy in its ideal form, versus democracy in reality, is one of its defining features.

The **Hostile Dissatisfaction** profile also includes young people who are feeling the deepest levels of political polarization in this country. Their scores on affective polarization, as well as on support for bipartisanship, are both below average.

Finally, this group scores exceedingly above average in endorsing violence as a means to achieving political goals. In short, this group of young people believe that democracy in our country is falling short of its principles, that “the other side” is wrong, and that violence is sometimes necessary to work toward what they believe is right.



Civic Behaviors, Skills, and Support

The other defining characteristic of youth who feel **hostile dissatisfaction** with democracy is that they are nonetheless highly engaged in it. Beyond voting, which is relatively equal among all three profiles, youth in this group are by far the most likely to participate in other forms of civic action like volunteering or taking on leadership roles. Peacefully or not, these young people appear willing to fight for the democracy they want. And they believe that requires major institutional change: they display lower levels of trust in institutions than the youth who feel a **passive appreciation** of democracy.

Youth with a **Hostile Dissatisfaction** democratic profile are not just inclined to take action: they are also ready to do so. These youth score much higher than their peers who feel **dismissive detachment** on political efficacy and on the measures of civic access, support, and culture in our CIRCLE Growing Voters index. And they score highest of all in media literacy, which suggests they may be more informed about the state of democracy than some of their peers.

Summary and Analysis

This third profile of democratic attitudes, while small in size, describes a key and concerning group of Gen Z youth. Youth who approach democracy with **hostile dissatisfaction** are the most ideologically liberal compared to youth with other profiles. Additionally, compared to the **Passive Appreciation** profile, more youth in this profile tend to be queer.

Our analysis shows that **hostile dissatisfaction** with democracy occurs when there is a significant gap between beliefs about the ideals and values of democracy, and the

perceived functioning of democracy today. This disconnect, combined with a lack of trust in civic institutions like Congress, the office of the President, and the Supreme Court, lead to disillusionment with the effectiveness of democracy and an awareness of its shortcomings.

It also appears to fuel a strong thirst for political change that requires action that goes beyond voting. This group of youth is engaging in activism and taking on roles in community organizing and protests that have been central to pro-democracy movements both



I think a lot of young people are not very trusting of the government and police. I think young people are realizing that, when voting, we have always been just picking the lesser of two evils, not a candidate most people actually like or believe in.

PROFILE 3 RESPONDENT

domestically and globally. Their level of media literacy suggests they are astute consumers of news and other sources of information that can illuminate systemic injustices embedded in our current structures of governance, as well as how those problems impact outcomes for various communities. They feel well-informed about political and social issues, and hold critical perspectives that could help them identify overlooked points of intervention and potential areas for improvement in current democratic processes.

As knowledgeable actors with a respect for democratic values and a willingness to actively participate through both traditional and non-traditional forms of civic action, these youth who feel a **hostile dissatisfaction** with our democracy are also a powerful force for reshaping it.

As knowledgeable actors with a respect for democratic values and a willingness to actively participate through both traditional and non-traditional forms of civic action, these youth who feel a hostile dissatisfaction with our democracy are also a powerful force for reshaping it.

At the same time, their recognition of the flaws and limitations of how our country is currently governed may be fostering frustrations and deep skepticism in peaceful institutional change that is fueling a desire for drastic change by any means necessary—including political violence. They have as high a sense of political efficacy as youth with **passive appreciation** of democracy, meaning they believe they can and should be able to affect change and they may feel especially disenchanting when their efforts prove futile. Their support for extreme measures to achieve what they believe is right also manifests in their belief that others are wrong, their lack of support for bipartisan compromise, and their lack of engagement with those “on the other side.” That makes this a particularly concerning group in terms

of potential threats to democratic stability and social cohesion.

These young people have urgent criticisms of our democracy that stem from a strong commitment to their belief in its potential value. To harness their desire for reform in a constructive manner will require showing them that change is possible, especially when they work with others. A first step may be to create pathways for **Hostile Dissatisfaction** youth to engage with their peers who have other democratic attitudes, so that they may experience effective change-making that is rooted in a critical analysis of the failures of our current system but seeks to peacefully engage others in building a stronger democracy.

05 Implications and Recommendations for Action

Young Americans Support Democracy in Principle, But Are Less Confident About It in Practice

Our research belies some characterizations of Gen Z as uninterested in democracy or fully flirting with authoritarianism. Among youth overall, that's not the case: there is a strong consensus that democracy itself is fundamentally valuable, and a majority of youth are committed to its core principles like free and fair elections, equal treatment, and government accountability. An overwhelming majority of youth also reject authoritarian measures and political violence.

But there is also deep discontent about democracy as youth are experiencing it today. Young people want a government that is accountable, transparent, and responsive to their needs, and most youth feel that our democracy is not meeting their expectations. For some youth, that leads to complacency, detachment, or frustration about democracy. For a smaller but still consequential group of young people, it is leading them to consider any means—even violent or undemocratic ones—to achieve their political aims.

→ Recommendation 1

Efforts to engage youth in defending and strengthening democracy should not center on trying to convince them that free speech and democratic norms are important. Most of them already believe that, and those who don't are unlikely to be convinced by merely saying so. We have to engage in the hard work of reforms that will make democracy more responsive and effective at meeting youth's needs and that will demonstrate the value of the democratic project in tangible ways. The process of identifying and implementing those reforms must include youth with diverse views on democracy so that our systems and institutions start working for all young people.

Lower Civic Development, Information, and Support Is Linked to Detachment from Democracy

Research has consistently shown connections between lack of access to resources and opportunities, and lower democratic participation (e.g., lower voting rates). Our work here shows that this connection extends to attitudes about democracy itself.

For example, youth with the **Dismissive Detachment** profile are the least likely to value basic democratic principles, to support the protection of individual rights, and to favor bipartisanship. It also scores lowest on dimensions of media literacy; on individual and collective political efficacy; and on the measures of civic access, support, and culture that CIRCLE has identified as key to Growing Voters. When combined with the fact that this group has a disproportionate share of youth of color, a conclusion emerges.

Lower civic access and support can contribute to skepticism about democratic processes and institutions. It may even make youth susceptible to authoritarian alternatives, as they search for forms of government or of political action that can more effectively address their needs.

➔ Recommendation 2

We must invest heavily in increasing civic access and support for young people and in improving a culture that promotes civic engagement. These foundational elements of civic learning and development are the root causes of democratic dismissal; when young people do not feel they have the tools or ability to participate in a political system, they are less likely to value it. And asking young people to engage in a democracy that we have not prepared them to navigate is setting them up for failure and frustration that can lead to detachment.

Identity Matters, But Civic Experiences and Social Inequality Appear to Matter More

There are a few significant differences among the profiles by race (the **Dismissive Detachment** profile has a higher share of youth of color) and by sexual orientation (the **Passive Appreciation** profile has a much lower share of queer youth). Notably, there are no significant differences by gender or by age (e.g., 18-24 vs. 25-29). But, in general, the strength or weakness of civic access and support for youth in a given profile has a stronger relationship with attitudes about democracy than any demographic factor.

Socioeconomic inequality is also an influential factor: the group of youth who feel **dismissive detachment** are significantly less likely to have college experience. In contrast, youth with a **passive appreciation** of democracy, who trust and support our system of government the most, on average have the highest income. That said, it is worth noting that these inequities, as well as civic access and support, are often tied to structural gaps and barriers by race and gender in American life.

➔ Recommendation 3

We must challenge and look beyond common narratives that have often centered race and gender in discussions of young people's views on democracy and authoritarianism. These and other aspects of identity remain important, and Gen Z's diversity demands that we pay attention to them. But education, access, income, and community support emerge as far more influential to young people's democratic attitudes. By focusing on the gaps and disparities that emerge based on these factors, we can direct efforts and resources where they are needed most.

Young Activists' Urgent Desire for Action is a Challenge and an Opportunity

None of the three profiles of democratic attitudes represents the perfect ideal, and none of them are uniformly negative. Each has its strengths and challenges, but youth who feel **hostile dissatisfaction** with democracy deserve special attention and concern. They are a unique group that defies some broader trends in our research. They score highest on civic participation and media literacy, meaning they are engaging with information about democracy and putting it into action. They are also the least satisfied with democracy and believe it is not meeting their needs. But they do not want an authoritarian leader to solve their problems; they are willing to do it themselves—even if they must resort to extreme measures.

There is extraordinary potential in engaging with these informed and active young people who believe in the ideals of democracy but need it to be better. Their attention to politics and their individual and collective efficacy make them valuable potential leaders in efforts to improve democracy and engage their peers. Neglecting their views and needs would risk missing out on that potential and could even drive them further away from favoring democratic processes.

→ Recommendation 4

We should create opportunities for young people with different attitudes toward democracy to talk, engage, and take action together in ways that leverage each group's strengths. Youth who are most appreciative of democracy, and most trusting of institutions, can share their perspectives and strategies for action with those who are distrustful and dissatisfied. At the same time, the dissatisfied youth can inject a sense of urgency into their peers whose satisfaction with democracy may be leading to complacency. Their similar levels of efficacy—meaning, the belief that they can contribute and achieve political change—can serve as a common ground for conversation and action.

Notes

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For Inquiries

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Protect Democracy is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to preventing American democracy from declining into a more authoritarian form of government.

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The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) is the preeminent nonpartisan research center on young people's civic learning and engagement. CIRCLE is based at Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life.

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